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ABSTRACT

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Changing the High School Core Literature

Catrina Tuft

School of Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

This study examines the core literature in our high school book rooms. Has the core literature changed over time with changing demographics? The review of the literature established the existence of a core literature, and that most high school students read from a fairly small list of books. The literature review reveals that students are not happy with the book selections and teachers are having a hard time keeping students engaged in the reading material. Department heads of English programs at two Northern California schools participated in an interview about the core literature. Their responses indicated that although some schools are given a significant amount of variety concerning their book lists, schools are forced to cover so much material that they only have time to teach what is required.

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Introduction:

When telling people I am a high school English teacher the same response is always received, "I hated English class." People consistently tell me I am brave to teach such a loathed subject. I am hurt by the response from the people I know. I love the subject of English, and am proud of the literary works introduced to my students. At the same time, I wish our school book rooms were filled with a wide array of multicultural literature that related to the lives of my students. As a new teacher the realization of teaching a difficult subject to a bunch of reluctant teens has already become apparent.

The last three evenings had been spent preparing my introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*. Looking through my college notes I re-mastered the background of the play and Shakespeare's life history. I was ready to answer any questions they threw at me.

At the beginning of fourth period the students got into groups and brainstormed their knowledge of Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet*. The results were pathetic; group lists consisted of elements like "he's dead", "it's old", "it's sad", and "they both die". Together we read the prologue and spent forty minutes deciphering the language. I was trying to teach my students the value of dramatization while they sat quietly at a desk reading a part. None of my students had been previously exposed to middle English, and now they were expected to read and comprehend one of the world's greatest playwrights. One day into the play and the students had already decided they hated it.

To spice up our readings we spent the second day discussing the historical aspects of *Romeo and Juliet*. For ten minutes the students were engaged in a discussion about the plague, but then it was back to the difficult language and smooshy plot.

After numerous student complaints about the play I took a poll. How many students had been to a professional production of a play? One student raised his hand. Actually, it had been a ballet performance. Not quite what I was looking for, but nice try.

We continued through *Romeo and Juliet*, trying to pick out key phrases and important scenes. Students did many small projects to make the acts pass quickly and still insure comprehension. As the teacher I felt horrible, "How dare I make Shakespeare a bad experience."

Taking students to a production was not an option. Finances and transportation issues put a stop to the idea. Instead, we divided up the last act and performed it in class. It involved lots of photocopying because the school did not have copies for students to take home. The play we were reading was part of a ten-pound anthology of freshman literature. It was impossible to read a part while standing and still hold the enormously awkward anthology.

We spent many days practicing word pronunciation and constructing basic props and costumes before performing the play in class. Most students still felt awkward speaking the language, but enjoyed the experience of participating in the class reading. At the end of the unit students admitted to enjoying the productions, and for the most part the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. They were still not ready to dive into another Middle English play.

Statement of the Problem:

Has the literary canon in high school English classes changed with time and the current demographics of our region? And if the canon has not varied, what is the reason?

In a country filled with such diversity and a wide array of newly published material why have our book lists in high school English classes not changed with the demographics of our area in the last fifty years? Many of the books in our schools are the same editions that were there six years ago when I graduated. And only a few of the books have been published within the last forty years.

Our school bookrooms are filled with books written by British or American male authors. Most were publish pre-nineteen fifties and are about issues today's students do not comprehend, like war and depression. The books they are given are often ripped, torn, or written on. The very books we expect our student to respect are often missing pages, or are filled with vulgar messages from past students. Book presentation combined with outdated content leads to undesirable reading material. Why have our schools not incorporated more material students find interesting and engaging? Why have our high school book lists not changed with time?

Rationale:

Each school has a core curriculum; a designated set of standards that every teacher is required to teach. The subject of English is no exception. Every state produces a book of standards to guide districts into forming a curriculum. The book of standards outlines the teaching guidelines for each subject, and each individual grade level.

From that point each district, and then each school, formulates a core curriculum for the grade levels. For example, the California State Standards mandate the introduction and focus of freshman and sophomore English in the concentration of drama (California 1999). Most schools have decided to assign *Romeo and Juliet* to all incoming freshman.

Books are purchased and unit plans are established. Teachers become comfortable with the subject matter and time goes on. New teachers enter the field and new students progress through school. Yet, the books in our bookrooms rarely reflect the time period, or the demographics of the area. Students become disassociated with the material and many people are blamed for the failing test scores of our students. Through it all, no one thinks of introducing new novels our students may love. The classics are important; the material they cover is an essential part of history. Writers like Shakespeare, are wonderful introductions to the way of living, politics, and living conditions of their time period. Maybe incorporating a few new interesting modern novels would establish our students as book lovers, and they would learn to appreciate all literature for the many lessons it can teach.

Silvia Ashton-Warner (1963), a teacher in Australia, was responsible for teaching a classroom of New Zealand's native Maori children. She had been given instructions on how to teach the young children how to read and was finding it unsuccessful. She came up with the idea of teaching them to read by relating the words to their daily life. Her goal was to use the children's lives and surroundings to teach them new words. Unlike the instructional directions she had been given she realized her students had no need to learn words that did not relate to them. She focused first on words that the students could use daily. Once their studies related to them, her students absorbed the written language eagerly. Ashton-Warner realized that children's lives are completely self-centered. Children and teens have a hard time focusing and caring about things with which they do not relate.

The same is true today. High school is solely about the high school students, and today's students could care less about war and depression considering the fact that it does not relate to their lives. Many students realize history is important, but relating to it through literature is not easy when socialization and acceptance is your main priority.

Background and Need:

Our failing test scores and frustrated students imply the need for change. Broersman (1992) reports an increase in discipline problems and a fairly unanimous complaint that students are becoming less engaged in their studies. There have been many ideas proposed to provide a quick fix for our school problems. What about simply taking into account the ideas of our students? We are trying to educate them, but for the most part they have little input into the contents of their education. Not until college do students get to study what interests them. Most literature they read in high school is chosen for them, and they may be frustrated because they do not feel empowered in their education.

We expect our students to be engaged in the material they are forced to study. Even giving students a limited choice of options could make students feel like participants in the learning process. Living in a democratic society our students are used to making choices for themselves. Although we let them choose their future careers we do not let them have any part of their public educational learning process. As adults we simply tell them what they need to know. By the time students enter the upper grades many have lost the childhood love of discovery. From personal experience I know allowing them some creative freedom often fuels their imagination and drive.

Literature Review:

The following articles and studies look at not only the high school book lists b[illegible] also critique the impact the authors have seen in the public educational system. This paper is an accumulation of various perspectives on the topic of a high school literary canon.

List of Books Taught

Applebee's (1990) study surveyed public, private, Catholic, and independent schools and the books they required their students to read. Applebee's study was a comparison to a study of the same sort done in 1963. Applebee found that changes since 1963 had been minimal. Applebee acknowledges that both the 1963 study and his own only questioned the use of book length works. No poetry or short stories were included.

Applebee's study contains a list of the works he has discovered to be the most widely read by high school students. He also tracked which titles are read by which grades. For example, it is customary for freshman to read Romeo and Juliet. Applebee writes about the idea of the canon implying which works should be taught to which students and why. Applebee acknowledges the pressure by the state, and individual districts, to decide which books should be purchased by English departments.

Filling the state need for a suggested list the California State Department of Education has published a list of recommended literature for teachers and administrators. It consists of a list of over 1200 book titles for administrators, teachers and librarians to use as possible reading material for students. Selected titles are supposed to be student centered, and appeal to the appropriate age group. The objective of the list is to refer students to literature they will most likely to find interesting.

The book is divided into a core literature section and a recreational and motivational literature section. Within each section traditional categories divide the works. Suggestions include titles appropriate for specific grade levels. Writings from diverse authors are listed.

Opinions

Broersman questions the recommended book list origins, and indicates that many of the suggested books have no relevance to today's adolescents. Broersman's (1992) personal experience as a high school student and then a high school English teacher cause him to reflect on the desires of the student, the demands of the state, and the ability of the teacher. Acknowledging the fact that students are often not interested in the same material as adults, and not gullible enough to simply swallow the line of a teacher saying it is good for you, leads to disengaged students who see nothing worthwhile in literature.

The pressures of state and school boards to test all students leaves teachers feeling they can only teach students how to read efferently, or simply concentrate on remembering factual details after reading. Teachers feel the pressure to adhere to the curriculum standards and the stress of trying to teach 100 students a day. In return they stick to anthologies with teaching instructions in the margins to aid their daily activities. As a result teachers do not transmit to their students a desire to develop a personal interpretation or make a connection with reading material.

Broersman states that as long as states continue to test the standards and teachers remain afraid of introducing new controversial literature our teens will remain distanced from the literature. Broersman's chief concerns are the needs and educational excellence of our adolescent students. At the same time, as a teacher, he is disturbed at his

numerous attempts to share a subject he loves with a group of young people who despise the writings of the very language they speak on a daily basis. Broersman's main objective is to use material students find engaging to teach other students.

Leach (1986) looks at studies done in the past where recent high school graduate students choose a list of books they feel all other students should read. Five books were listed by over fifty percent of those polled. The following eight documents were chosen by over one third of the students surveyed.

Author	Book	Surveyed percentage
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	*The Scarlet Letter*	72%
Shakespeare, William	*Romeo and Juliet*	72%
	Hamlet	57%
	Mac Beth	56%
U.S Government	*Bill of Rights*	54%
Documents	*Constitution*	54%
	Lincoln's Gettysburg Address	54%

Leach also suggests the idea of presenting a list and letting students choose which book is most suited to their personal interests. She points out that this would make students feel like participants and help them explore their interests within an already chosen field.

In a study similar to Leach's, Stachelek (1976) surveyed high school students and asked them to simply list their favorite novels. Many of the titles listed were contemporary novels and titles that had been recently turned in to movies. There were a few exceptions, mainly titles by Shakespeare and Dickens. Since the article was written

in the late seventies many of the book titles mentioned were Jaws, Rocky, and Star Wars type novels.

Stachelek's survey proved that most students prefer to read material they feel is relevant to their lives at the current time. She discusses the fact that most of the material students are forced to read in high school seems to have no connection to their daily personal lives. Stachelek claims that simply maintaining a literary canon in high school bookrooms is not productive to student motivational learning.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's book, *Teacher*, focuses on the needs of the children. Discovering that teaching the required reading to her class of native New Zealand children she adopted a new way of teaching reading. She created stories that related to their lives and began the learning experience centered on topics that directly related to the children. Children focus on themselves, it is a natural phenomenon. Asking them to learn something that they feel will have no direct connection to their lives is completely useless. Teaching students to learn and read when it involves self-motivation is a relatively easy process of guiding the student to the material they want to learn. Sylvia Ashton-Warner's work poses the question, why struggle with unimportant material when you can teach the essential material to eager students?

Existence of a Literary Canon

Purves looks at the idea of literary canon and its effects on society. He claims canons simply reinforce cultural norms, and fail to bring about discussions surrounding important issues. Purves supports the use of student relevant reading material to encourage multilevel student learning. If students are engaged in the material they will

not only add in personal and cultural issues but also current world topics that are effecting their lives.

Purves looks at how current schools use the literary canon to ask students to memorize simple facts. Purves is disturbed that our school system does not use literary material along with student prior knowledge or life skills to increase social and worldly skills. Purves discusses the contradiction of a school literature canon with the commercial culture that absorbs students and makes no demands on them. Watching television, listening to music and most other commercial culture requires little effort of its viewers. Purves talks about students feeling of success at being a part of commercial culture, but feel they have no connection to the pre-selected literature presented in high school English classes. Purves suggests introducing novels that can be accompanied with history, culture, and society of the time. Using the present cultural and commercial knowledge students already have in collaboration with relevant literature, they can then be encouraged to read, write, and discuss the elements of the literature.

At the other end of the spectrum Stotsky (1991) claims a literary cannon has not been established. Declaring a canon is an exclusive list of works that has been required reading for the last one hundred years Stotsky insists school bookrooms do not contain a specific canon. Looking at past studies done in 1907, 1970, and 1989 she claims only four books that were on the 1907 study still remain on the list in the 1989 study. Stotsky goes to a lot of trouble to emphasize the fact that a canon can only be created if a majority of the books read in todays high schools were exactly the same books that were required at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although Stotsky is very particular about the intended meaning of the word canon she does not address the fact that although a majority of the books in our bookrooms are not from 1900 most of them were originally published before 1950. I wished to take a closer look at our school bookrooms and find out from local teachers what must be accomplished for new novels to be purchased and if it was a common practice.

Met. ology:

I gave interviews with open-ended questions to two different department heads of English at local Northern California high schools. Everyone involved was eager to answers my questions. English teachers often receive the brunt of student dislike regarding the current curriculum, and even those that don't want to change the book list still want today's teens to be more motivated in the learning process.

Subjects:

My first subject was Judith D. She is a Caucasian female English teacher with more than twenty years of teaching experience. She has been department chair at Casa Grande High School numerous times. My second subject was Kylee C., a Caucasian female English department chair at Petaluma High School. She has been an English teacher at Petaluma for over ten years. I also questioned a Caucasian female librarian at Petaluma High School who had previously been an English teacher.

Materials:

I asked each subject to answer a few questions about the contents of their respective schools English class bookrooms. I carried a paper with the questions, a blank piece of paper and a pencil.

List of questions:

Department Heads/ Teachers

What literary work, if anything, does the state/district/school require you to teach all incoming freshman?

How much money does the school spend each year on new books?

Where does that money come from?

Are schools required to purchase their books through certain agencies?

Can I have a list of books currently in the school bookroom?

What process does the department go through for a teacher to reserve a set of books for their students?

Who decides which books and which editions are purchased? What is the procedure?

Are students asked to evaluate a book before a set is purchased?

Does the department have a requirement to purchase new titles? What is the requirement, and if not a 'requirement' then the tradition?

How many English teachers encourage student choice in their reading selections?

What leisure reading material do you enjoy? Why?

Procedure:

I contacted people by phone and asked if they would answer a few questions about literature selections. Both teachers agreed to answer any questions I had concerning book selection policies in place at local school sites. All people involved were informed that this study adhered to the guidelines for human subjects' research (American Psychological Association, 1984).

Data Analysis:

Buying a book for a high school bookroom is not an easy process. Given the fact that the funds are available, the procedure to buy a set of books is long and tedious. Many teachers resort to using already available books because the process of getting a book approved is not only lengthy, but it is also very time consuming. There are approximately eight time-consuming steps to purchasing a set of books for your school.

First, a teacher must present the book to the department faculty and get it approved by the department heads. Second, the teacher must present the book and in some cases even possible lesson plans to be taught to the school administration. If the administration agrees the book is a wise purchase for the school the teacher then must go present it to all the other high school English departments in the district. Within the Petaluma Unified district that would only include one other school. Once the other department has approved the book then the paperwork must be once again approved by the other high school administration. If all four of those steps are successful the book finally makes it to the district office, where it must be approved by the district administration. The sixth step is to send the novel and already approved paperwork to the state Education Department where the book must be read and reviewed by state employed people. Once the California State Education Office has approved the book the teacher has the okay to investigate available book companies to find which will sell the best edition for the most cost effective price. The seventh step is to have the funding approved through the department and local school administration. It is then possible for the teacher to order the book. Traditionally from time of order it still takes a three to six weeks for delivery, if the novel is in stock.

There are of course instances when the process varies. For instance, some teachers teach elective English classes and are therefore given separate funds for those classes. Usually their funding only allocates enough money for one or two class sets of each novel. As a result, it is most often unlikely another teacher would borrow those books for their traditional English class. Teachers of special elective classes must also go through the eight-step hassle of buying a book. There are English classes for second language learners, and Migrant Education and other programs provide money or grant funding for special topic-appropriate or grade-level-appropriate novels. Except for grant funded money the same eight-step process is also expected of the teachers. In the case of grant funded money the applying teacher must report the uses of their spending to the grant supporter.

Results:

Looking at the two high schools in Petaluma I discovered a little over half of their selection is identical. Casa Grande has a much bigger selection of novels, but they have a slightly larger student population, and they seem to keep more of their old decrepit novels. The following is a list of the books in each school bookroom.

Author	Book Title	CGHS	PHS
Achebe, Chinua	*Things Fall Apart*		X
Adams, Richard	*Watership Down*	X	
Angelou, Maya	*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*	X	
Bradbury, Ray	*Fahrenheit 451*	X	X
	The Martian Chronicles	X	
Buck, Pearl	*The Good Earth*	X	

Author	Book Title	CGHS	PHS
Cather, Willa	*O'Pioneers*		X
Camus,	*The Stranger*		
Cisneros, Sandra	*The House on Mango Street*	X	
Cormier, Robert	*The Chocolate War*	X	
Conrad, Joseph	*Heart of Darkness*		X
Conroy, Pat	*The Water is Wide*	X	
Dickens, Charles	*Hard Times*		X
Euslin, Bernard	*Heroes, Gods and Monsters*		X
Fitzgerald, F. Scott	*The Great Gatsby*	X	X
Gibbons, Kate	*Ellen Foster*	X	
Gibson, William	*The Miracle Worker*		X
Golding, William	*Lord of the Flies*	X	X
Guterson, David	*Snow Falling On Cedars*	X	
Guest, Judith	*Ordinary People*	X	
Hasbury, Lorraine	*Raisin on the Sun*		X
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	*The Scarlet Letter*	X	X
Hemmingway,	*Farewell to Arms*	X	X
	Old Man and the Sea	X	
Hesse,	*Siddartha*	X	
Homer	*Odyssey*	X	X
Hurston, Zora Neale	*Their Eyes Were Watching God*	X	
Kesey, Ken	*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*	X	X

Author	Book Title	CGHS	PHS
Keyes, Daniel	*Flowers for Algernon*	X	
Lee, Harper	*To Kill a Mockingbird*	X	X
Miller, Arthur	*Death of a Salesman*	X	X
	The Crucible	X	X
Orwell, George	*Animal Farm*	X	X
	1984	X	
Mariaremarque, Erich	*All Quiet on the Western Front*	X	X
Mowat, Farley	*Never Cry Wolf*	X	
Salinger, J.D.	*Catcher in the Rye*	X	X
Saroyan, William	*The Human Comedy*	X	
Shakespeare, William	*Hamlet*	X	X
	Julius Caesar		X
	King Lear		X
	Mac Beth	X	
	Merchant of Venice		X
	Midsummer Nights Dream	X	
	Much Ado About Nothing		X
	Othello	X	
	Romeo and Juliet	X	X
	Twelfth Night		X
Sinclair, Upton	*The Jungle*	X	
Sophocles	*Oedipus*		X

Author	Book Title	CGHS	PHS
Steinbeck, John	*Of Mice and Men*	X	X
Tan, Amy	*Joy Luck Club*	X	
Thoreau, William	*Walden*		X
Trumbo, Dalton	*Johnny Got his Gun*	X	
Twain, Mark	Adventures *of Tom Sawyer*	X	
	Adventures of Huckleberry Finn	X	X
Wakatsuki-Houston, Jeanne	*Farewell to Manzanar*	X	
Walker, Alice	*The Color Purple*	X	
Weisel, Elie	*Night*	X	X
Wolff, Tobias	*This Boy's Life*	X	
Wright, Richard	*Native Son*	X	

For both schools it is customary for freshman students to read some or all of the following, *Romeo and Juliet, To Kill and Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, Huckleberry Finn* and *Night*. Sophomores traditionally read *Lord of the Flies, All Quiet on the Western Front*, a Shakespeare play, and a selection from Orwell. Juniors normally read *Farewell to Arms, The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman* (or *The Crucible*), *Catcher in the Rye* and *Fahrenheit 451*. It is customary for senior year to be "the year of tragedy" due to their book list. The senior list consists of them reading *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, Hamlet* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Casa's seniors also read *Snow Falling on Cedars*, another tragic novel.

Casa Grande not only has a greater selection of novels, but the selection is also more ethnically diverse. In this case it is logical because the school is somewhat larger,

and their student population is slightly more ethnically diverse. Casa Grande stocks all of their books in a department room, where as Petaluma students check out their novels from the library. Because the library is used as a warehouse, novels that are not used are boxed and put in storage.

All of the books on the above list are available for teacher use. However, approximately half of the titles are no longer full class sets, or the books are too tattered; as a result many are not used in the classroom. Using books of a poor quality is a bad message to give our students. Students don't want to read them, and teachers don't want to teach with them.

Conclusions:

Local high school bookrooms have similar contents. Although not quite half of their contents vary, the books they actually use and buy in mass quantity are very similar. Since a requested book purchase has to be approved by both school English Department Chairs it is easier for the schools to have similar book lists. Due to the hassle of getting a new novel approved it is easier to just keep purchasing new editions of the same novels when a class set becomes tattered. Teachers and department heads try to purchase the most student comprehensible editions of the classics. In some cases, like when Petaluma High purchased *The Odyssey*, the school buys one edition and then finds it too difficult for students. The high school then finds the funding and purchases a second edition in the hopes of maintaining student interest. The book had been approved, to switch novels would have required more time and effort from teachers and administrators.

Implications:

Although buying new novels is a hassle, teachers should be encouraged to buy new titles. I suggest using the students as a resource more consistently. Students don't have much of a say in what they are reading. I imagine if teachers asked their students what novels they liked a fantastic book list would be created. I realize not all of the novels students like are school appropriate, but nonetheless students would feel that their voice was important. From there teachers could review novels that had been suggested and the process could continue from that point. It might be helpful to use your classroom as a forum for getting new titles purchased. Students and teachers together could approach Department Heads and administrators. Student feedback has been very limited, but I think most teachers would be pleased to hear the novel suggested for purchase was pre-approved by the student body.

We should introduce our students to reading by encouraging them to read novels that reflect their lives. We need to concentrate on making our students bibliophiles before we can ask them to read the difficult works of Shakespeare and Walden. Today's students don't understand the purpose of reading literature. They see English teachers as people who pick apart their writing skills, and make them read outdated books about subjects they don't understand.

Students feel honored to be trusted with the responsibility of directing their own education. By giving them some options and decision-making responsibilities students once again feel the world is concerned with them. In that instance they have become a pivotal point in their education. An active student role in education eases the pressure on

the teachers while simultaneously empowering and engaging the student. Student feedback is essential for a successful English program.

Another aspect that needs to be altered is the book funding. Schools need the ability to have a more aggressive turn around in their book rooms. Once a book has been used they might as well sell the set of novels. The money raised could be used to purchase another set of new books. Schools would not need to store as many antiquated titles, which are not going to be used. If books could be sold for profit their shelf room could be filled with new purchases. Student input could be used to select the incoming titles; everyone would be happy.

In order to produce life long active learners schools need to stay focused on teaching students things they will need in the future. Although the classics are an essential part of the education core, providing a basis of student loved books could only be beneficial to students and teachers alike. Working as a team, students and teachers could fill our book rooms with a diverse array of educational novels and anthologies.

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